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*The Sculpture of Luiz Costa Lima*

## ABSTRACT

An intellectual auto/biographical sketch of the relationship between Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Luiz Costa Lima, from the 1970s to the present, from Costa Lima's work on the imaginary, to Gumbrecht's work on presence.

## BIOGRAPHY

Professor Gumbrecht is the Albert Guérard Professor in Literature, Professor of French & Italian and Comparative Literature at Stanford University. He holds a courtesy appointment in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and is affiliated with the Department of German Studies, and the Program in Modern Thought & Literature. He is also Professeur Associé au Département de Littérature comparée at the Université de Montréal, Directeur d'études associé at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris), Professeur attaché au Collège de France, and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

## THE SCULPTURE OF LUIZ COSTA LIMA

For quite some time now, I am observing with astonishment that people seem to have changed very little when I see them again after many years. It first happened to me with the distinguished intellectual historian Jean Starobinski: I think I must have first encountered him when he was in his mid or late fifties and we met again, I guess, when he was in his early seventies and I found him to look exactly the way I remembered from twenty years earlier. So I was about to theorize that there was a group of persons who did not really age, and Starobinski was my prototype. Meanwhile, however, I believe that this impression (which I register as an increasingly general impression for me) is an effect of my own aging (I am sixty-one years and four days old as I am writing these lines). It is as if my memories of people were aging with me so that their looks never become surprising. If the Starobinski whom I first met was twenty years older than my own mid-thirties of the mid-1980s, he did not appear any older when, fifty years old myself, I saw him again which, presumably, was the effect of my memory making him older without letting me know – for the seventy-year old Starobinski was not older indeed in relation to me than the fifty year-old Starobinski had been. The next thing I realized was that I also began to have a hard time recalling how people had looked when they were much younger. Photos that showed them as having looked different from each present seemed just wrong, and it was as if I could not allow that they became ‘other’ in my memory from whatever they were ‘today.’ Perhaps old age means, among other, more physical things, that some senses and the imagination of differentiation get lost – and others become more intense. Today, like with faces from the past and the present, I can much less grasp nuances of regional accents and personal idiolects than I used to but, by contrast, I have become much more sensitive to the different tones and degrees of luminosity in the daylight of different countries. It is like my nails growing faster and my hair growing slower than before.

### I

When he was around forty and I was about thirty, Luiz Costa Lima and I once visited Jean Starobinski at Geneva and Luiz could not stand the Thomas Mann-like Starobinski-in-the-flesh (children playing Chopin in the background), up to the point of referring to him, aggressively, as ‘o barao Starobinski,’ to the same Starobinski whose mind and whose work he so admired. And yet there was a time, I distinctly remember, when Luiz was complaining (but was he sincere?) about what he strangely described as his own oh so very luso-aristocratic features – whereas I had always thought, really always and from the very beginning, that these features were the aristocracy of something ‘natively’ Brazilian. I had no reference for my very strong impression and fantasy, no niche of reality to which to assign it, and later I thought for a moment that I must have seen (or projected) what Alencar had wanted Brazilian origins to be like. For me, Luiz has always been aristocratic above all, aristocratic in his own, unique and, I have no doubt, exemplarily democratic way. Perhaps he indeed is the one permanently unchangeable figure in my memories, in each new perception, and in my entire life, beating even the differently unchangeable Starobinski. Luiz is unchangeable like a sculpture, maybe too good for variation, with a body that Ernst Kretschmer, the German psychiatrist of the ‘somatic types and character types’ from the 1920s (and unfortunately also from the 1930s), would have classified as (stout but) ‘athletic.’ Luiz is monumental.

### II

Of course I remember that he had a habit of going out *p’ra sambar*, with the dignity of an Olympian from around 1900, during that summer (Southern hemisphere winter) of 1977 that we spent at Rio, in an apartment of Rua Pacheco Leao 320, facing his apartment and Jardim Botânico, and I also remember that he had a young, cute, and very ambitious girlfriend, and two different-looking boys for whom he was a loving and to-be tragic father. But the face was always the same, always the face of today, of each today, always the face and my fantasy of native Brazilian aristocracy.

### III

If my existence depended on it, I would not dare to claim that I first met Luiz Costa Lima at Konstanz – which would mean before the end of 1974. Then again, this must have been the case for I can still hear the voice of my academic superior announcing the arrival of his *brasilianischem Uebersetzer*, and that I should go and see him at the railroad station because the translator had declared to have some interest in my work, which I knew was a standard lie and excuse of the boss for sending me to the station, a lie that I had long ceased to take seriously. Of course the guest had never heard of me (or read my then largely in-existent work) but before we even really spoke (in Castilian) it was clear that Costa Lima was so many more things than just my superior’s *Uebersetzer*. In Brazil he was, at that time and university-wise, a key-mediator of French Structuralism and the one reader who would subsequently discover German reception theory and so many other worthwhile positions from the European Humanities. Wolf-Dieter Stempel, a linguist and the only academic at Konstanz who knew Portuguese (probably the only one, too, who was not provincial in his own way), Wolf-Dieter Stempel had met Costa Lima, somewhere, and had helped him obtain a Humboldt fellowship. But then Stempel’s generosity hit its limits

because none of the Konstanz big-shots of those days had time to engage with the ‘Brazilian translator.’ So by default it was me, the assistant apprentice, whom he ended up talking to and spending several days with, which was my undeserved luck. One fact was very clear, as I said, right from the start, sculpture-like clear: this Brazilian mediator extraordinaire was no mediator at all. He was alert, determined, already quite monumental, and he wanted something. To me, it was not evident at all what that something was – but he made it clear that it needed to be *wissenschaftlich*, up to the point of being ‘mathematical’ (there was even some talking about him – or was it about his father? – having been very good with numbers). And as I then believed that I wanted exactly the same, i.e. to be *wissenschaftlich*, I liked and admired him a lot right away so that, believe it or not, by the time we arrived from the Konstanz station at my nearby parked car (an orange BMW 2002, not Costa Lima’s kind of thing), I knew that I wanted Luiz as a friend to hold on to, a friend much stronger than I, a friend for life.

#### IV

That eternal face has a hint of being cubic, with sharply cut parts, assembled as if by a principle of contrast. An impressive forehead; a classical mouth with elegantly swung lips; the chin strong but not like the will to power; with a nose just right, remarkably unremarkable and keeping the features at minimal distance from each other; his beard is an indispensable part and therefore invisible, too; eyes in thin strikes; prominent jaw bones that would not produce an impression of broadness. Brazilian, minimalist, pertinent, sharp, never smiley, but smiling only when he wants to – needs to? In short: a male beauty of contained seriousness, forever.

#### V

Why would Costa Lima bring forth the work that has become his, that life-long and ever-complexifying reflection on and pushing further of the syndrome of the world’s Mimesis, of the real world becoming present in texts, unselfish, difficult, sometimes merciless in his effort, with small advances, like climbing the most difficult mountain, and with heroic conquests that only the initiated can appreciate? I am only aware of one comparable case, namely Wolfgang Iser and the problem of Fiction<sup>i</sup> (they had to become friends, strangely inseparable friends in their mutual distance, like Mimesis and Fiction). Costa Lima cannot be overlooked, he may well have been a roadblock for others, self-erasure is not the thing to praise him for, and yet he fully brackets himself. This in its own right uniquely (uniquely, again!) impressive work is not about him, it is only and even exclusively about what he once must have chosen to be his problem, it is about the world outside yourself that always and at the same time is overwhelmingly and even threateningly close and desperately far away, far away like water in the desert and like the touch of erotically electric skin in old age. This is how he watches Vasco da Gama, his favorite soccer team, and Formula One races on TV, endlessly far away and irresistibly attractive. Nothing ever is not serious for him, the just-for-fun worlds remain outside. He really wants to find truth, knowing better than anybody that he could never tell if he reached it, that ultimate truth about texts as a mode of being-in-the-world, together with things and other bodies. The one huge silent statement about himself is that he never writes but about the world. Even the imaginary in his books is never subjective, it is nothing but an organ to modulate the relation to a world where nothing is easy, a world in which he patiently seeks elementary formulas,<sup>ii</sup> like the poems on Pernambuco by Joao Cabral de Melo Neto do. Only a sculpture can be so coherent that it never needs to leave itself.

#### VI

Costa Lima’s friend, from that day at Konstanz on (or was it, after all, from that week at Bochum on, a year or two later), has long abandoned the unselfish and most serious dedication to the cause of one question. Whenever he remembers his friend Luiz he must ask himself whether he is not a traitor, a traitor of *Wissenschaft*, of seriousness, of logic, and of that dream of mathematics (that he secretly knew right from the start he could not nourish). This friend has made it a habit to bracket the world and to talk and write about presence as what the world does to him, indulging in himself, speaking about moments of intensity in his body that permeate his mind.<sup>iii</sup> Instead of a sculpture, I sometimes fear he has become a pop-song.

#### VII

There are scars on both of Costa Lima’s hands, from trying to extinguish a fire that he had caused one day, careless for a short moment and thus jeopardizing the life of a beloved one. I know that he would have given his hands, his eyes, his brain, his body to drown that fire. Never have I seen hesitation or ambiguity in him. But I have felt much if not infinite patience for his causes.

#### VIII

We recently met at Academia da Cachaça, on purpose alone finally, no students, no colleagues with us, a bit insecure about having to rely on each other, like a loving couple shaken by crises and old age. I did what I would not do with anybody else, I drank with restraint and ate as if I appreciated what little we ordered. Our conversation was precarious and beautiful. For every word could have gone wrong but the words never did. Not

quite through we found ourselves with our lives but, yes, in different final chapters at different places, with the right to speak of grandchildren – and yet also under the curse that bothers only our generation, i.e. the curse of having to be youthful forever, of becoming the veterans of a generation of protest, obliged to give classical shape to our faintly remaining gestures of rebellion. Old and serene we try to be but cannot quite convince the world – and less ourselves. We had more *saudade* than passion for each other. But time went fast, and we pleasantly felt that misunderstandings were less than a remote possibility. There was nothing ironic about us, nothing awkward, just visible asymmetry, a perhaps inexhaustible reservoir of sympathy, and certainly tenderness. Then Luiz, as ever the more reasonable, sober, and sincere one between the two, said that he needed to go (I would not have dared to finish our date, given how frail it all was). I cannot remember who paid, but this didn't turn into a *pundonor* anymore – it was something we were 'beyond' now. We walked one block along the mediocre apartment buildings of Gávea in the darkness, until we reached a broader avenue, towards the Jockey Club, I believe, broad enough to find a taxi back to my hotel-without-character in Ipanema. Luiz took a taxi too, he had serious surgery behind himself, and we had both walked with the pace of old men. I hope we have a date for next year and for as long as we stay around. For one does not abandon something as old as our friendship – and even less will I forget that one pal who is a sculpture.

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## REFERENCES

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<sup>ii</sup> Luiz Costa Lima, *Control of the Imaginary: Reason and Imagination in Modern Times*, Ronald Sousa (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

<sup>iii</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004).